

Success Stories

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Abstract

Success Stories, patient's and parent's reports of gains achieved through vision therapy, serve several purposes. They help the patient and the parent to recognize and be more aware of the behavioral changes that have occurred, and the degree to which their goals have been achieved. When a patient's therapy is concluded, inclusion of the Success Story with a report to the referring professional provides the referring professional with a statement of the gains achieved, in the patient's own words. It also fosters greater confidence in vision therapy as a treatment modality and encourages increased referrals. Most importantly, Success Stories also reveal the tremendous impact that vision therapy has on people's lives.

Key Words

vision therapy, visual training, outcomes, Success Stories

In recent years, the use of *Success Stories* has contributed significantly to both my practice development and to my professional growth. The purpose of this article is to share the use of *Success Stories* in my practice, and benefits we have derived from using them.

Many years ago, when I was starting out in vision therapy, Dr. Bob Kraskin's OEP series, "Visual Training in Action,"¹ was a very important text that helped shape my development. Our study group spent three or four years reading, analyzing, and discussing these papers, which dealt with practice administration and organization in the area of vision therapy, as well as with the sequential utilization of vision therapy procedures, a topic which had a major impact on my thinking.

In Bob's practice he saw each visual training patient for a brief, monthly progress case study during one of the patient's office visits in the last week of each month. In addition, he requested that each visual training patient (or parent) report on his or her progress, in writing, on a monthly basis, as the patient moved towards the achievement of his or her goals. Each month the patient or parent was given a blank report form and told to "record your observations on the results and changes that have occurred during the past month in your (or your child's) general and visual behavior, as a result of your (or your child's) visual training." The philosophy underlying the use of this form is

that measurements of success and achievement of patient's goals are noted in relationship to everyday activities in addition to optometric findings. The primary purpose of the form is that it serves as a tool for patients and parents to become more aware of changes in visual behavior, general behavior, personality, and performance, and hence to increase conscious awareness and appreciation of what is taking place. Secondly, it is a tool for the doctor to be kept abreast of the patient's responses and attitudes towards the progress made.

I used Kraskin's report form for several months, but stopped after a fairly brief trial. I see these now as the precursors to today's *Success Stories*, and I suspect that my ceasing to use them 30 years ago stemmed from my failure to appreciate their value and potential at that time.

Twenty-five years later, on a visit to another Bob's office, Dr. Robert Sanet in Lemon Grove, CA, I found that he had bulletin boards in his reception room filled with patients' and parents' reports of changes they had observed as a result of vision therapy. These *Success Stories*, written not monthly but rather at the end of therapy, were similar to Kraskin's. They had a short paragraph at the top, asking the patient or the parent to describe the changes that they had observed as a result of vision therapy, with the rest of the form blank to provide adequate room for the patient's response.

The *Success Stories* that I read in Dr. Sanet's office were enthusiastic and exciting. I immediately recognized their potential value as a public relations tool to be read by other patients and parents for whom vision therapy might be recommended, and I resolved to implement their use in my own practice.

We have been using *Success Stories* in the office for the past five years and have found them to be very powerful. We normally perform a progress evaluation when the therapy is completed, and ask patient and/or parents for a written summary, which becomes the *Success Story*. Virtually all of the *Success Stories* are quite positive, and most fairly overflow with enthusiasm and excitement. A sample of our blank *Success Stories* form is depicted in Figure 1.

The *Success Stories* that we receive typically describe diminution or elimination of the patient's presenting symptoms and improved school achievement, ability to sustain attention, sports performance, self-esteem and interpersonal relations. The frequency with which patients report improved self-esteem as a result of the heightened achievement that derives from improved visual function is remarkable, and is extremely rewarding. Following are some recently compiled *Success Stories*.

1. Christopher, age 9

"My son has progressed from not reading to being one of the better readers in school. His esteem has dramatically improved and he really enjoys school. His report cards are now great and he can do his schoolwork and homework quicker. Life in general is much better. He even enjoyed the Vision Therapy.

"Thanks for improving his vision and his life!"

2. Dena, age 25

"Before I started visual training my eyes were always tired, I had headaches and I couldn't focus on things. This caused me to have a hard time socializing with others because I felt very insecure. Visual training has changed my life. I feel more confident and can do things that I couldn't do before, such as reading. I also enjoyed working with the staff. They really made visual training a fun place to be. I'm really going to miss everyone."

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PLEASE SHARE YOUR SUCCESS WITH OTHERS

We have enjoyed treating you, and are pleased that substantial improvement in visual function has been achieved. Patients often note that improved visual function brings changes in school performance, work performance, sports, and even in attitude and personality. We would appreciate your describing below any changes you have observed as a result of vision therapy. We'd also appreciate your permission to share this with others, who may have little knowledge of vision therapy.

Date _____ Name _____
Signed _____

Permission to share? Yes ___ No ___
Would you recommend vision therapy to others? Yes ___ No ___

Figure 1

3. Mathew, age 12

"Matthew was in 5th grade last year, and he has a learning disability. He was reading on a 2nd grade level. Frustrated that the school could not do anything for Matthew, I signed him up at a learning center for extra reading help. They recommended Dr. Birnbaum and Dr. Bessler to us. Since we discovered from Dr. Birnbaum that Matt had visual problems and could be helped, we have seen such an improvement in Matthew's reading and his self-esteem. He doesn't hesitate to try to read a book or even a sign while riding in the car. He even likes to read to his brother. He still has a learning disability but now the frustration of not being able to see or read properly has been corrected.

"He is doing much better in the 6th grade thanks to Dr. Birnbaum and his staff. I would definitely recommend to anyone to have vision therapy if needed. It really

boosts Matthew's confidence. I'm really pleased."

4. Krystle, age 9

"Krystle's reading has improved so much since she started vision therapy. She enjoys reading now and her progress with words has given her confidence. She no longer has trouble (not as much) reading the blackboard at school. Her teacher has noticed a major improvement in her ability to stay on task and the effort she is putting in.

"I would recommend vision therapy just for the fact the results are so much more than I hoped for. Krystle is beginning to realize how smart she really is, and the glow she has now makes me happy. I could not have gotten Krystle this far alone. Thank you so much."

5. Christopher, age 10

"I thought that I would never find the proper help for my son. When my son Christopher first started vision therapy he

was withdrawn, seeing blurry, reading phonetically, skipping words, reversing letters, unable to concentrate, unable to follow directions, skipping lines, and, most of all, he had a very poor short-term memory. After three months of therapy I started to notice the differences starting to show. And after one wonderful year, every symptom has disappeared. He reads with no hesitation, he is confident, happy, and his school work is that of an "A" student. I can't thank all of the staff enough, but thank you, thank you, thank you for giving my son's childhood back to him to enjoy. May God bless you all.

"I urge all parents, please don't EVER give up on YOUR CHILD."

6. Allison, age 7

"Before vision therapy, Allison was a 1st grader, struggling with reading and falling to the bottom of her class. Dr. Bessler's exam proved she had a visual problem. She reversed and transposed letters ("b" and "d", "was" for "saw", "of" for "for"), picked up letters and words from lines other than those she was trying to read, and she couldn't remember certain words that she saw over and over again.

"Since vision therapy, instead of reading one or two pages at one sitting, she is sometimes reading the whole book. She's always volunteering to read in school now. She's gained a confidence: she knows she can read books the other children are reading.

"We bless the day we sent Allison and she started vision therapy. Thank you, Dr. Birnbaum and Dr. Bessler."

We use these *Success Stories* in several ways. We display the most enthusiastic on the bulletin board in our reception room under a "*Success Stories*" banner headline. Others are kept in a large loose-leaf binder, also displayed prominently in the reception room. As a matter of course, patients and parents read these while waiting for their appointments. Further, we specifically point them out to parents of patients who are candidates for vision therapy, and encourage them to read these *Success Stories*. At the case conference we discuss the benefits that the patient can expect from vision therapy, and relate them to the benefits other patients have derived as reported in their *Success Stories*.

Many of our vision therapy patients are referred by other professionals, including optometrists, ophthalmologists, educators, and occupational therapists. When a patient is referred by another professional, we call to thank them, and send a written report of our findings and recommendations. When vision therapy is completed, another report is sent with the current optometric findings. Also included is a copy of the patient's *Success Story* so that the referring professional gets not only my statement of the changes that have occurred but another in the patient's or parent's own words and handwriting. This provides dramatic evidence of the benefits and value of vision therapy to the patient. Another copy of the *Success Story* goes into the patient's file, to be available for future reference.

Success Stories have value in other ways as well. When I lecture to optometric groups or give in-service lectures for educators, reading a few *Success Stories* creates heightened awareness of the impact that vision therapy has made on patients' lives. Similarly, when I lecture to optometry students, reading a few *Success Stories* creates an awareness of how "real people" benefit from vision therapy, and communicates the enthusiasm and appreciation of patients whose quality of life has dramatically improved.

We publish a quarterly newsletter that is sent to our patients and to our referral sources. A current *Success Story* appears in each issue, and serves to remind readers, in the patient's or parent's own words, of the value of vision therapy.

Ultimately the most important benefit that I have derived from *Success Stories* is not their public relations value, which is considerable, but rather that which I have learned about behavioral optometry from reading them. Before I started with *Success Stories*, I did not fully realize the extent to which vision disorders affect patient's lives, and the degree to which remediation impacts positively on quality of life.

What comes through in reading the *Success Stories* that patients write is not only the elimination of asthenopia, diplopia, loss of place when reading, and other symptoms of functional vision disorder, but, rather, improved school achievement, improved ability to sustain attention, and improved sports performance. Most significantly, heightened self-

esteem is commonly reported as patients succeed in vision therapy. Children whose vision problems are at the root of their school difficulty often come to believe that they are indeed stupid or lazy. They frequently report heightened self-esteem as a consequence of improved life achievement following remediation of vision dysfunctions. These reports have in turn heightened my awareness of the degree to which vision disorders that interfere with learning and achievement cause poor self-image, poor self-esteem, and attendant psychological problems.

Untreated functional vision disorders frequently produce high levels of frustration for both children and parents. Tension levels are often high when a child comes home from school frustrated and upset, wondering why he or she is stupid, or has to work so hard. Children with untreated functional vision disorders often must spend inordinate amounts of time struggling to complete homework. Parents then spend excessive time working with these children, and tension levels frequently build and spill over into arguments and fights, with increased frustration on the part of both parties. As one parent recently expressed it to me, when their child comes home from a frustrating day in school, "he is all wound up; it bounces off his brother and sister and ricochets to affect the entire family."

My heightened awareness of the degree to which untreated vision disorders affect patients and their families makes it easier for me to communicate the importance of vision therapy during our case conference. As children (and adults) improve through vision therapy and report improved school achievement, improved self-esteem, improved interpersonal relations, and improved family relations, I recognize that these changes do in fact stem from the vision therapy. Changes in awareness, performance, behavior, learning and self-esteem commonly occur at levels that are far-removed from the specific procedures used to remediate the underlying vision disorder.

As parents observe their children's improvements, and as the doctors and the staff become aware of those improvements by virtue of their *Success Stories*, there is an excitement throughout the office. Parents recognize their children's achievements, and staff and doctors be-

SUCCESS STORIES continued on page 77

come more cognizant about what we are accomplishing, with increased awareness of the value and significance of the therapy we provide. As Kraskin wrote presciently, many years ago that his patient progress reports not only bring awareness of the benefits of visual training to the patient's conscious level and provide the doctor with this additional insight, they also "provide the optometrist with a 'living proof' of his value to society since in actuality they may be considered as 'testimonials'."¹

Our use of *Success Stories* and the heightened levels of awareness and enthusiasm that derive from them contribute to our vision therapy practice being busier than ever before. And, as a consequence of this heightened awareness of the value of vision therapy and the extraordinary benefits to both our patients and their families, I am experiencing, after 35 years in practice, higher levels of excitement and enthusiasm than I have ever experienced before.

Reference

1. Kraskin RA. *Visual training in action - postgraduate courses. Optom Extension Prog, Oct 1965-Sept 1968.*

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